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MEETING HOUSE ESSAYS



ICONOGRAPHY AND LITURGY

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Liturgy Training Publications

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INTRODUCTION

The delight of reading a book is that it opens up one's mind and soul to the spiritual world of another. It is a door through which the reader is privileged to enter into and share in the cosmos of the author. Whether the book is a biography, a travelog, a spy novel, a work of science or a work of theology, we are led to see anew the world in which we live and to interpret our experience of it in a different light.

So it is with visual imagery. A painting or a piece of sculpture is not merely something with which to decorate a room or a church. Pondering a painting or touching a sculpture are ways of entering into the spiritual universe of the creator, sharing his or her vision and interpretation of the world.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the relationship between the church's liturgy and its tradition of visual imagery. How might the imagery of the church building mirror the vision of the church community as it is unfolded in the patterns and rhythms of the church's core activity—the liturgy? To a certain extent, I might appear to be going over well-trod ground; many excellent books have been written on the subject of both liturgy and sacred art. But it is my contention that works of art in our churches should be commissioned to mirror the vision of the liturgy. I hope, therefore, that I may be forgiven if I repeat some things. Furthermore, by its nature, this exploration is merely a brief overview of the subject.



At last, there are indications that we are emerging from the doldrums—we are in the midst of a new awakening to a more complete understanding of the place that sacred art should occupy in the life of the church. Artists and artisans are once again being commissioned to create new works, many of them most exciting. But this invigorating breath of wind needs to be given some direction so that it might be in accord with the most profound transformation that has affected the church this century—that is, our understanding of the nature of the church as well as its core manifestation, the liturgy.

In *Duodecimum Saeculum* (1987), an apostolic letter to the bishops of the Catholic church, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Sacred art must tend to offer us a visual synthesis of all dimensions of our faith.” Yet, in general, much of even the new imagery displayed in Roman Catholic churches appears to have been chosen more because of devotional factors and available space than for any consideration of the liturgy. It most often does not “offer us a visual synthesis of all the dimensions of our faith.” There is still a tendency today to fall back on considerations formulated prior to the Second Vatican Council. Meanwhile, many Christian artists are producing highly creative works of art that are difficult to visualize as having any place in the context of public worship.

The last 50 years have seen another response to questions concerning the role of the visual arts in church buildings: a considerable reduction in imagery. This is partly because of the enthusiastic and iconoclastic response of pastoral leaders to new liturgical initiatives, and partly the result of the ardent pursuit by church architects of new possibilities in structure and design.

New ideas in architecture have led us to fashioning many of our contemporary churches denuded of all but the minimum amount of imagery on the grounds that these buildings are adequate imagery in themselves. And there is no doubt that some of the buildings designed by some of the great modern architects—monumental shapes rising out of the environment—are superb sculptural masterpieces, creating liturgical spaces that are deeply imbued with a sense of the sacred.

Nevertheless, at work in this new form of iconoclasm is a form of reductionism, the truncation of liturgy to word and rite alone. In churches of other traditions, a renewal of interest in religious art has begotten a tendency to treat church buildings as art galleries, often containing beautiful works of art that are displayed not as integral parts of the church's life of prayer but as professions of the church as patron of the arts. And this is the crucial factor: Liturgical art (including architecture) should have as its purpose the engaging of the assembly as fully as possible in that core action, the church's liturgy.

ARCHITECTURE AS IMAGERY

That the place for worship is itself an image of a human-divine reality is made clear in the preface of the eucharistic prayer from the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*:

Father, all powerful and ever-living God,
we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks.
The whole world is your temple
shaped to resound to your name.
Yet you also allow us to dedicate to your service
places designed for your worship.
With hearts full of joy
we consecrate to your glory
this work of our hands, this house of prayer.
Here is foreshadowed the mystery of your true temple;
this church is the image on earth of your heavenly city:
for you made the body of your Son, born of the Virgin,
a temple consecrated to your glory,
the dwelling place of your Godhead in all its fullness.
You have established the Church as your holy city,
founded on the apostles,
with Jesus Christ its cornerstone.
You continue to build your Church with chosen stones,
enlivened by the Spirit,
and cemented together by love.
In that holy city you will be all in all for endless ages,
and Christ will be its light for ever.

The liturgy itself witnesses to the symbolic nature of the church building and all that it contains. The vision of the Book of Revelation takes root in the church, made up of chosen and living stones. The total church building—its structure and its contents—becomes the image, the icon, the tangible and visible sign of the people gathered within it as the holy city of God. It is the manifestation of their community as the heavenly temple. It is the sign and symbol of the community that gathers therein, the community that gathers to celebrate the love of God and the work of its redemption.

The church is not an amorphous community. It is constituted and confirmed as church by celebrating the liturgy. Therefore, the building is not merely the place where the liturgy takes place, a mere shelter. It is, rather, an integrated structure, taking its shape from that church both doing its liturgy and consisting of all that goes into making it the image of the holy city: its furnishings, works of art and devotional artifacts, as well as its architectural features. Thus it is, in the fullest sense, the symbol of the church-at-prayer, the icon of what the church is in its essence. A building can only be called a church if it is the expression, the symbol—the icon—of the community of people that make up the church.

Grace works through nature, through the very materiality of the liturgy. And that nature—the materials used to express and communicate that grace—should reflect not only grace's truth and goodness but also its beauty. The city of God, the new Jerusalem that descends from God out of heaven and takes its form in the community of the church, is described in Revelation as having all the radiant glory of God and is depicted in terms of great beauty. Truth and goodness are clothed in beauty. The beauty of God, the beauty of the Christian vision, the beauty of the communion of saints—all this beauty needs to be disclosed, revealed and embodied in works of art that communicate something of that beauty.

The artist, like the poet and the musician, is called to be a vehicle of the beauty of God. The spiritual vision that the artist is asked to unfold can accord with the truth and goodness of God only if it is beautiful. If the church building and its works of art are truly to act as icons of the Holy City, to be signs and symbols of the radiant glory of God, beauty needs to be at the forefront of the priorities of both architect and artist. Thus, this eucharistic preface from the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar* succinctly states the significance of the building and its works of art and celebrates that significance ritually. The liturgy of the dedication of a church makes a compelling witness to the

importance of works of art as integral parts of the liturgy and vouches for art as a dimension of the way of salvation.

VISUAL IMAGES: INTEGRAL TO LITURGY

Liturgy is multidimensional. Therefore, liturgical artwork is as much an integral part of the liturgy as is music, song and the drama that unfolds at the ambo, font and altar. As architects and parishioners take these latter aspects of liturgy into account when designing or reordering a church, they must also take into account the cycles of liturgical imagery. Rather than trying to fit it in afterward, the building should be designed and completed with an iconographic program already in mind. In other words, the shoe should be made to fit the foot, rather than the foot having to be mutilated to fit the shoe. Artwork is integral to the liturgy, part and parcel of the liturgy. Without it, the liturgy is mutilated—for it is being denied this visual language by which a whole dimension of the sacred realities can solely be expressed.

Karl Rahner once said as much in a talk given to Catholic artists in Munich. He said that each language of the arts has evolved because it, and it alone, can express something of the human vision and can embody that which no other language can. Thus, each has its own unique part to play. Without giving each language of the arts its own inimitable role, the liturgy is left incomplete; facets of “all the blessings of the heavenly places in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3) are left unexplored. Through works of visual art, the divine mysteries that the Lord enacts within his mystical body, the local parish community, are made visible and overflow into the physical universe which is destined toward, and begins to take its shape within, the kingdom.

This is what John Paul II meant in *Duodecimum Saeculum* when he wrote: “Authentic Christian art is that which, through sensible perception, gives the intuition that the Lord is present in his church, that the events of salvation history give meaning and orientation to our life, that the glory that is promised us already transforms our existence.” Imagery is thus not part of the liturgical “environment,” and the use of this term creates a distinction between imagery and the liturgy rather than illuminating its role within it. Within the place for worship, as an integral part of the liturgy, imagery actively reveals the presence of the Lord and gives witness to the events of salvation that the liturgy celebrates. It is a context in which the actions, texts and music that we use are interpreted.

In this way, liturgical art goes beyond catechetical art, imagery used for teaching purposes. Although liturgical art also has a catechetical function, teaching is not its primary function.



In addition to or instead of telling a story or illustrating a point, an icon reveals a presence. Contemporary icon by Meltem Aktas, inspired by a 13th-century work in the Art Museum of Catalonia, Barcelona.

Photo: Meltem Aktas

The primary function of liturgical art is to coalesce with gestures, readings, prayers, music, vestments and other artifacts so as to engage the assembly as fully as possible in the divine mysteries that are revealed through these elements as a whole. Thus the building with its artwork becomes, through the assembly enacting the liturgy, a composite language of prayer, a harmonic canticle of praise.

Using this language, Christ the High Priest—by means of the Holy Spirit, the animator of prayer—energizes, gathers up and draws this assembly to himself to pray with him to the Father and to continue the salvation of the world. In essence,

through the unity of the ritual, the art and the architecture, what we are celebrating is the mystery of our being church in all its various dimensions. It is the mystery of our ineffable union with Christ and the mystery of Christ, the head of the church, unfolding in us that same fullness of being and life that he himself has.

RITUAL AS IMAGERY

Of course, the fundamental form of liturgical imagery is the ritual itself. The function of other forms of imagery, including architecture and visual art, is to elucidate, complement and develop the significance of the ritual that the assembly is enacting. As does the ritual itself, other forms of liturgical imagery reveal the presence of “all the blessings of the heavenly places” that are unfolded through the liturgy celebrated. This is fundamentally the significance of the word “icon,” for it is distinct from a narrative or illustrative work: It reveals a *presence*.

Having understood ritual for so many centuries as rubrics required to be enacted under pain of grave sin, we are now in the process of rediscovering something of its essential nature. This rediscovery of ritual as the visible enactment of the mysteries—as a network of symbols, of dramatized metaphors probing, embodying and transmitting the sacred mysteries—means that if we are to do more than give casual attention to the salvific action of God among his people, then we need to enact these symbolic and sacramental actions as fully as we are able. We must draw out the various dimensions of the divine operation within us.

Christian ritual is a form of prayer that makes our own the Word of God. Ritual is the fullest form of prayer and it becomes, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the vehicle by which God engages our entire being ever more deeply in fullness of life. It witnesses to the goodness of matter, the resurrection of the body and the redemption of the physical universe. Christian ritual is a powerful instrument, involving the community and each person not only in itself but in the mystery that it discloses. The ritual *action* is the fundamental form of liturgical “iconography” that all other forms of imagery—the building itself and any stained-glass windows, statues, icons, tapestries, mosaics or frescoes within it—serve to interpret, echoing its themes, patterns and rhythms.

It is important to realize that Christian ritual action is not exhausted by the Mass alone. All liturgies—the Mass, the other sacraments, the liturgy of the hours and the various rites and blessings—and their themes, patterns and rhythms as they are

celebrated throughout the year—are one reality celebrating and effecting in their various ways the different aspects of God’s presence, love and divinizing work among us and within us. It is through the celebration of a whole liturgical life (insofar as a parish can) that Christ, present in the parish community, unfolds in it every aspect of his ministry to humanity. To give an authentic witness to the vision of the church, all dimensions of this presence need to be brought to life.

IMAGES OF CHRIST

Through the composite language of text, gesture, music and visual imagery, the liturgy endeavors to communicate something of the manifold presence of Christ with us:

- as our high priest, present through the community of the church gathered together—priest and people who together are the sign and sacrament of his presence, his Mystical Body;
- as our divine teacher, present through the reading of the scriptures and the homily;
- as the fount of eternal life, present through baptism;
- as the sacrificial gift, present through the bread and wine as the body that is given up and the blood that is shed, to nourish us with his divine life and transform us into his kingdom;
- as the divine healer, present through the liturgies of reconciliation, the anointing of the sick and other healing services;
- as the divine source of charismatic gifts, poured out in confirmation, marriage and ordination.

Combined, these forms embody the one but multifarious presence of Christ. Those charged with creating liturgical imagery should neither overlook any of these forms of Christ’s presence nor diminish or emphasize any one of them in any way that is detrimental to the other forms of presence. Because of the long-cultivated devotion to the eucharist outside of Mass, there will remain the hazard of emphasizing this form of Christ’s real presence in the eucharist to the point of underplaying or even excluding other forms of that presence. Christ is present in various ways for various purposes.

Some will fear that this depreciates the eucharistic presence of Christ in the reserved sacrament. On the contrary, it is by making sure that we embody Christ’s presence in all forms that we celebrate fully all the forms of presence. One way in which the church of the past had endeavored to convey that sense of the multiform presence of Christ was by depicting the main incidents of his life and his ministry on the walls of the church.

The incidents of his life and ministry, as proclaimed in the cycles of gospel readings through the liturgical year and as celebrated in the feasts and seasons, would be revealed as the mysteries being unfolded in the assembly. The mosaic cycle of the life of Christ in the Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily, is one such example. Perhaps we could return to this custom, placing the Stations of the Cross elsewhere.

The Stations of the Cross are the most common form of representation of the mysteries of Christ. They originate with the medieval pilgrimage along the “Way of the Cross” in Jerusalem, brought home to be walked in the local church in the form of wooden crosses with visual panels. But they do not depict the whole of the paschal mystery as it is celebrated in the unfolding liturgical year. So perhaps the stations are best installed as a walkway around the outside of the church, leaving the interior of the church for the permanent and portable imagery relevant to the liturgical assembly.

In northern and wetter climates, this would not be practical. Perhaps the stations could take the form of portable icons, erected in appropriate places during Lent. But much thought needs to be given to such alternatives in order to ensure programs of imagery within the church building that give visual form to the mysteries of Christ as they are unfolded in the liturgy proper. Forms of popular piety requiring iconographic expression, such as the stations, need to be integrated accordingly and must not replace or intrude upon liturgical iconography. This is particularly true of stained-glass windows. The images used in the windows should be in some relationship to other images in the room instead of being a smorgasbord of the various donors’ preferences.

IMAGES OF THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Christ is present *to us*, *among us*, and *for us*. Christ celebrates the liturgy through the united assembly, with various individuals serving in numerous ministries for the good of the whole: cantors, presiders, deacons, lectors, eucharistic ministers, ushers, acolytes, sacristans, choir members and other musicians, and artists, too. This community also includes people from the past as well as the present, all together as the communion of saints, celebrating the mystery and reality of the eternal kingdom of God under earthly signs, images, symbols and metaphors. Liturgical iconography—as opposed to catechetical iconography or mere depictions of biblical personages or events—somehow depicts those celebrating the liturgy in their various roles, and this includes the work of artist and architect.



In the Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily, Christ as Teacher is depicted in the apse, but ringing the nave are mosaics showing episodes from his life. The room is enveloped in the life of Christ rather than rung-round by the stations.
Photo: John Render

The artist's act of praise and worship, of contemplation and intercession, lies in the creation of works that make visible the staggering vision that the church holds in keeping for, and seeks to communicate with, all humanity. And the artist should not only seek to embody and interpret the functions of these various liturgical ministries; the artist should seek to depict his or her own ministry, too. Liturgical iconography should enable the assembly to experience itself as the active celebrant of the sacraments of the kingdom of God. By way of the iconographic program for the place for worship, all should be able to identify

with what is going on in the ritual and feel that they are a part of the whole.

This has been the traditional role of images of the saints. The imagery of the saints signifies the oneness of heaven and earth in the eternal banquet, the oneness of the communion of saints in which the assembly has taken its place through the sacramental gift of the Spirit at baptism.

This significance is sometimes obscured by placing among the images of the saints images of Christ as the Sacred Heart, the Good Shepherd or others. This custom blurs the distinction between Christ, the sole mediator between God and humanity, and the saints, our co-heirs. Christ is not merely another member of the communion of saints; he is the head of the Body, the head of the assembly that is his body here and now. In the days when imagery was placed on the walls in hierarchical tiers, the life of Christ was restricted to the upper tiers to indicate that what was represented in the upper tiers was being unfolded among those below, among the communion of saints that included the assembly.

Similarly, the use of three-dimensional sculpture to depict the saints seems more appropriate for devotion than for liturgy. Three-dimensional statues project themselves into and partake of our world; they are trapped in the world of our experience. But the liturgical purpose of depicting the saints is to signify the world of the kingdom, a dimension of living beyond time and space as we know it. The reason for placing images of the saints in the place for liturgy is neither to depict biblical narrative nor to memorialize a holy person; it is to reveal the presence of one who is now fully of the eternal kingdom, one who now shares in the glory of God.

Two contemporary images in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, illustrate this contrast. The images of Elizabeth Ann Seton and John Neumann are powerful and dramatic. That of John Neumann tells a story, but it is a story that is of the past. His followers no doubt continue his work today, but his own teaching days are over. So the image of him is not an "icon"—it doesn't mediate his heavenly presence to us. Rather, it is a memorial to him. There is an important place for work of this kind, but I would suggest that it is not within the space for liturgy. Conversely, the image of Elizabeth Seton strikes the viewer as a form of presence materializing from another dimension. It evokes a living—not merely a historical—presence, and as a result, Elizabeth Seton visits the viewer in a way that John Neumann does not.

Liturgical imagery has a function greater than that of merely commemorating saintly deeds. The subjects should be rendered iconographically “present” in a way that assures us, in the depth of our being, that we belong with them in the eternal kingdom that Christ has procured for us. “Let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on the earth, because you have died, and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:2–3).

Statues that are integrated into a background, such as those that are integrated into the west-front of so many great European cathedrals (like Chartres), are less self-serving than statues enthroned like Greek gods. They have the appearance of materializing from the divine dimension, and rather than overwhelming and dominating the observer, they have the effect of drawing one into their company.

IMAGES OF MARY

As a member of the communion of saints, Mary is a member of the universal congregation that the gathered people are also a part of. As such, she also receives the fullness of grace from Christ, her son. Though she thus may be the most exalted member, she should be rendered iconographically present as a member of the communion of saints—as one of the liturgical community, one of the redeemed. The image that conveys this sense (to me) more than any other is “The Coronation of the Virgin” by Agnolo Gaddi, in the Washington National Gallery. By clothing Mary in robes of the same color and form as Christ, Gaddi has created an image of Mary as a figure of the church in the act of being raised, by Christ her Savior, to share in the divine nature. Mary is honored as the Mother of God and the Church, as an “archetype” of the church and a paradigm for all people.

As such, she mediates the feminine face of God, the mother of compassion. Perhaps, to honor her appropriately, we should devote a separate chapel or shrine rather than installing a singular image of her in the main body of the church—as was done so often in earlier churches. (If not, she should take her place at the forefront of the communion of saints.)

Such a chapel could portray her in many moods. Medieval chapels often would have a cycle of images of her life (more legendary than factual), particular images of which would appeal to some devotees more than others, according to their personal circumstances. Contemporary Mary chapels no doubt should do likewise, enabling those who are timid, fearful, bold or overjoyed to identify with her and so find hope.



Gaddi's "The Coronation of the Virgin" depicts Mary as a figure of the church, Christ's body.

Photo: John Render

IMAGERY AND FURNISHINGS

The furnishings in a church building are as much a part of the iconographic language as are paintings or carvings. Together, these things comprise a geography of the spiritual world that we embody in the liturgy.

IMAGERY RELATED TO THE CHAIR

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (#7) and the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (#7) both teach that one of the ways in which Christ is present in the liturgy is in the person of the ordained minister. Any image placed in relation to the presider's chair, especially if it dominates the chair from above and behind (for example, in the apse), will interpret the liturgical role of the one sitting in the chair. Consequently, such an

image should be of Christ the high priest, the divine teacher, risen and ascended. The pantocrators of early Western and Byzantine churches, which often covered the ceiling of the apse, tended to represent Christ as hieratic and aloof—the source of all power both in heaven and on earth, the king of kings and the emperor to whom all earthly kings paid homage. Today, the love, joy and compassion of Christ, as well as his divine justice, need to be depicted.

An image of Mary in relation to the chair, even in the apse, is liturgically inappropriate. Mary does not preside over the liturgy; the glorified Christ celebrates the liturgy through his body, the church. An image of Christ in relationship to the chair properly interprets the role of the presider.

Perhaps, instead of having a permanent image of Christ behind the altar, the parish could commission banners depicting Christ in various modes for different liturgies: as the Bridegroom (for Weddings), as the Good Shepherd (for funerals or Eastertime) or as the Divine Teacher (for catechumenal rites). Such banners might be executed in the Tibetan style, as gouache images on paper, mounted on textile.

IMAGERY RELATED TO THE AMBO

The creative word proclaimed at the ambo is not unrelated to the water bath at the font or the sacrificial meal shared at the altar. What the word of Christ announces at the ambo is unfolded and fulfilled by Christ in the liturgy of baptism and the liturgy of the eucharist.

It has long been a tradition to carve the ambo in the form of an eagle, the symbol of the evangelist John. Sometimes all four of the evangelists have been carved into the pulpit. But in a sense, these are symbols added onto symbols; for the ambo and the book are powerful symbols themselves. Nevertheless, imagery—in the form of a tapestry, icon or other painting judiciously placed in conjunction with the ambo to interpret what happens there—might be of value. An image of Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, of Christ preaching the Sermon on the Mount, or of the prophets and/or the evangelists might work well. These latter images might be seasonal—for example, an image of Isaiah for Advent that is replaced with an image of John for the Christmas season. Or perhaps an image of Matthew could be placed near the ambo during Year A, when the Gospel of Matthew is read, and replaced in Years B and C with images of Mark and Luke, respectively.

Of course, great attention ought to be paid to the quality of both the lectionary and the book of the gospels themselves.



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Photo: Regina Ku

One way of bringing out the importance of the word of God is by binding them both in fine covers. Or perhaps, to ensure that the same covers can be used when new editions of the contents are published, have independent covers into which the book can be inserted. The great treasury of liturgical imagery from the past, in particular that preserved in the form of manuscript illuminations, should not be discarded but should rather be used as a source for inspired new work.

IMAGERY RELATED TO THE ALTAR

Forms of imagery related to the altar will necessarily interpret what is happening at it. The altar is the table where the church meets its Lord to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ and take its place on earth at the sacrament of the eternal banquet of heaven. As a plain, simple table, the altar has an iconographic role to play—bringing out the theme of the banquet. Yet the altar is also the place of sacrifice, the place where Christ offers himself to gather and nourish his own and unite them with each other and God.

The cross is the primary symbol of Christ's sacrifice, but where it should be placed vis-a-vis the altar requires some reflection. Because the cross interprets what happens at the altar, at the holy table of sacrifice, it certainly ought to be placed in relation to it. Perhaps it should hang over the altar, like the magnificent cross of Cimabue. In some places, a fine processional cross is placed in relationship to the altar. In these cases, it is important

for the cross to be returned to its place near the altar after the liturgy, so as not to leave the altar bereft of the cross between rites. The value of a permanent display of essential works of art lies in the ability of this art to extend the liturgy of the church in time, when rites are over, so that people, in their personal meditations, are still enabled to take part in and enter into the mysteries depicted.

The cross should certainly not be hanging on the wall behind the altar; for we are being led, by the liturgy, through the cross to our resurrection into the Kingdom of God. The cross interprets what is happening at the altar—it is not the end but the means to sharing in the glory of God.

IMAGERY RELATED TO THE BAPTISTRY

The font (particularly in its size and shape), the water itself, the paschal and baptismal candles, the white robes, the containers of chrism and the oil of catechumens all have an iconographic role to play. Any other artwork in the baptistry needs to develop and enhance the imagery evoked by these objects as well as by the texts and ritual actions of the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults and the Rite of Baptism of Children. The purpose of such artwork is to engage participants more fully in the reality that the liturgy of baptism makes present.

An English iconographer, Petra Clare, has created a panel painting that depicts the stages of the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults. This image, or one similar, could be placed near the ambo for the liturgy of the word that precedes baptism. Other images, such as Noah and the ark or the passage through the Red Sea, could also be depicted on panel paintings or tapestries and located either near the ambo or in the baptistry. The two ancient baptistries of Ravenna suggest the preeminent image related to the font: the baptism of Christ in the Jordan. Located in the domes over the fonts, these are images of Christ standing in the Jordan, with John the Baptist pouring water over him and the Spirit in the form of a dove hovering overhead. The use of this image in relation to the font clearly interprets both the ritual action and the texts used in baptism: This font is the Jordan, this minister is the Baptist, this person being baptized is being made over into Christ, and the same Spirit that descends upon Christ descends upon him or her.

A painting from the monastery in Santa Cruz, now in the Museum of Catalan Art in Barcelona, works in a similar way. It draws out the Pauline theology of baptism—that Christ's death is our death and Christ's rising is our rising—by depicting Christ rising from a tomb that looks like a baptismal font. A work could

be commissioned for the parish church that shows Christ rising from the tomb, with the tomb resembling the parish's font. Perhaps images such as these could be portrayed in panel paintings standing close to the font or on tapestry panels hanging from a corona over the font.

Finally, as the church becomes more aware of the importance of the holy oils and the practice of reserving them fittingly becomes widespread, imagery related to the ambry needs to be discovered. The oils are vehicles of the Spirit, pouring out spiritual gifts, imparting strength and bringing health to mind, body and soul. Images of the Spirit placed in relationship to the ambry may aid in the communication of the Spirit's presence. Images of the Spirit might include images of creation and recreation, images of the Spirit hovering over the waters and images of Pentecost.

FUNERARY IMAGES

The white pall and the paschal candle are perhaps the two strongest visual images in the rite of Christian burial. Perhaps they could be added to portable images of: the harrowing of hell; Christ descending into death to bring salvation; Christ bringing forth Adam and Eve from the underworld; Christ raising Lazarus from the dead; or Christ meeting with Mary Magdalene in the garden. These images might be placed near the coffin during the vigil and then carried to church for the Mass.

Gravestones provide another—now largely missed—opportunity for visual imagery that proclaims and embodies Christian faith in the paschal mystery. (Just imagine how deficient our knowledge of the early church would be had not our ancestors decorated their tombs!) Perhaps pastors should encourage parishioners to save up for and carefully select gravemarkers incised with images that speak of eternal life and the resurrection of the dead. Parish- and diocesan-owned cemeteries might be supplied with some sculptures or bas-reliefs that evoke the new Jerusalem. Germany in particular has produced some splendid contemporary headstones that make the cemeteries there delightful places to visit. They are powerful proclamations of the Christian belief that in death, life is changed, not ended.

SOURCES OF IMAGERY

The imagery of the scriptures is a vehicle by which the divine presence and action in the world are revealed. The scriptures are also the criteria by which the church interprets the world and the divine action within it. So not surprisingly, the scriptures are the primary source of imagery in Christian liturgy.



A contemporary fresco by Steve Erspamer in the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Helotes, Texas, is the last thing worshipers see as they exit the main door. It depicts Christ enthroned in glory and surrounded by people doing the works of mercy.

Photo: Steve Erspamer

The liturgy is rooted in the scriptures and is largely composed of the scriptures. Its prayers reflect their themes and images, its songs sing them and its rituals enact them. The working-out of this imagery as a visual language of both faith and ritual prayer is what needs to be rendered by the artist.

A church tradition worth reviving and maintaining is the use of the rich imagery of the Old Testament. Also, the sacrifice that Christ offers with us and through us could be lovingly represented by depicting the variety of tasks through which Christ continues his mission with the church in the world.

The documents of the church on justice, peace and other issues will be greatly relevant to the creation of a vital iconography. The scriptural images of the new and heavenly Jerusalem, the parables of Jesus that teach the economics of that new city (that the last shall be first, that those who come to work in the eleventh hour will be paid as much as those who worked from the first), and the prophetic visions of a just and orderly world (where the lion lays down with the lamb, for example) all deserve consideration. Perhaps it would not be amiss to portray signs of local industry and other forms of work by men and women, as well as images of the home, to reveal them as dimensions of the sacrifice that we offer with Christ.

A recurring theme in the history of liturgical painting and sculpture has been the depiction of apostles, martyrs and other saints engaged in the liturgical rites themselves. A good example is the fresco of the apostles at Ochrid, which shows the Lord presiding at a Byzantine altar. Today the Lord could be depicted

as the presider at the cosmic eucharist, at the banquet of the eternal kingdom, of which the eucharist on earth is the sacrament. In many early Roman churches, this figure of Christ was portrayed in the setting of the Kingdom of God, thereby teaching the congregation that by celebrating the liturgy they were already taking their place in the eternal kingdom that is both already and yet to come. The assembly gathered around the ambo and altar celebrates with Christ, their Redeemer and their destiny in the eternal kingdom, even now while still involved in the world's affairs. The iconographic celebration of this ensures that this vision remains part of the congregation's faith and permeates its prayer.

THE NEED FOR CONTEMPORARY IMAGERY

Imagery has a two-way effect. While it gives visual interpretation to the rites and words of the liturgy and enables us to articulate a vision of the unseen, it also enables us to give a sacred, religious interpretation to the images of daily experience. Much of the imagery of early Roman, Byzantine and medieval Europe borrowed directly from the imperial courts and was intended to impress the populace with the dignity and power of its sovereigns. But we live in a very different world and need to seek other sources, other models, for imagery that expresses our vision.

Liturgical iconography must both give visual interpretation to the liturgical rites and also weave a visual bond between mysteries celebrated and the daily world of the people who celebrate them. In this it shares the function of liturgy—to transform us, our attitudes and the way we perceive and interpret ourselves and our world. Thus the problem arises: How can we use the imagery of the contemporary world in which we live—drawing from sources such as advertising, newspaper supplements, magazines, television, powerful photographic images and imagery that we all hold in common as part of our culture—and rework it, reinterpret it and transform it so that it becomes a vehicle by which the sacred drama, the divine mystery of Christ's life and ministry enacted in the liturgy, is visually connected to the everyday world of people's experience?

If this seems to place more emphasis on representational imagery than on the abstract, it is because if people are to interpret the significance of the liturgical rites through imagery, then they must be able to read it. Otherwise it becomes irrelevant, surplus to their requirements. The relationship between the representational and the abstract needs to be carefully thought out so that representational imagery can give keys or clues to the meaning of the abstract—unless, of course, the abstract work



The abstract baldachin in St. Mary's Cathedral, San Francisco, evokes clearly the epiclesis, the calling down of the Holy Spirit upon the assembly's gifts of bread and wine.

Photo: John Buscemi

is self-evidently interpreting liturgical action. An example of a self-evident abstract work is the baldachin in St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco. It speaks of the falling of the Holy Spirit over the altar, of the epiclesis of the Mass.

A CAUTION ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ART

As artists strive for works of art that are truly contemporary, a caution is in order. The form that much of contemporary art takes is determined by prevailing fashions in taste, which are steered by art critics and reviewers catering to the prevailing trend of capital investment in art and by the galleries demanding works for sale to major public and private collectors. The object of liturgical art is not that of the art market and is thus not required to be directed by it. Liturgical art has a very different purpose and should therefore be infused with the spirit of that for which it is intended. Much modern church art may succeed as art but not as liturgical art because its spirit is determined more by the art market than by the desire to create images



A contemporary
needs to embody
grated vision of
Photo: Steve Ers

for prayer. And as Christian artists know only too well, contemporary artwork with overtly Christian themes is unfashionable. The galleries, generally, will not touch it.

FOR THE FUTURE: IMAGES FROM NATURE

The mystery of God's presence and action needs to be recognized as unfolding within the world of everyday experience. To make this point with art, the artist needs a profound sense of the mystery of God's presence not only through the church but through the very stuff of creation. The artist needs a sense of creation as the fundamental form of God's self-gift. A favorite



These banners are inspired by the canticle in Daniel "All you works of the Lord, Bless the Lord." Executed by Steve Erspamer, they hang in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Helotes, Texas.

Photo: Steve Erspamer

theme from the early years of the church was that of the mountain of God with the four rivers of paradise flowing from it. The church of San Vitale in Ravenna celebrates the kingdom with the walls of the church depicting flowers, birds and evocations of nature as symbols of the garden of paradise.

Contemporary times have seen the rediscovery of the world of nature and wildlife, the revelations of the macro- and micro-cosms of our universe and the resultant reappraisal of our theology of creation. This theme of creation as revealing the presence and wonder of God deserves to be revived now as a relevant symbol of the present and future kingdom, the fulfillment of all things

in Christ, and as a symbol that the future kingdom, which is already present in mystery, is the transfiguration of ourselves as well as the entire universe—the whole natural world and even one's own locality with its particular geography and ecosystem.

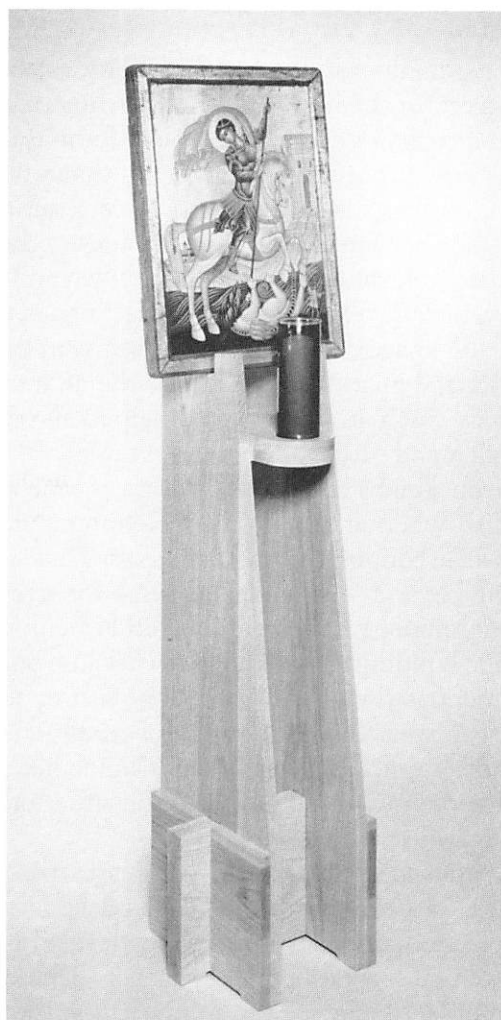
The whole world of scientific discovery is at our disposal, creating the possibility of exploring new images of the coming kingdom by transforming impressions of our universe into visual metaphors. The whole of creation, in its multifarious forms, is the way in which Divine Wisdom is “ever at play” in the presence of God.

Contemporary iconography needs to embody an integrated vision, one of the whole reality of our Christian universe: It is a vision that the One who creates and is present in all things, who celebrates the overflowing richness of the divine life in the fullness of a teeming creation, is the same Christ who became a man for our redemption. Without giving iconographic form to the unity of creation and redemption, we are presenting an unbalanced vision, a distorted faith—for the rites that we enact in our liturgies are giving witness to the unseen mysteries of God unfolding within all creation.

If the church is described as a sort of Platonic reality other than the earth and for which the earth is necessary merely as a recruiting ground, then the imagery created to give voice to the mystery of God will appear irrelevant to all but those who wish to escape “this vale of tears.” If our imagery is to speak to people who are becoming ever more aware of their intimate bonds with creation, then the earth should be represented as grounded within the reality of the kingdom and the church should be represented as the earth being transformed into the kingdom—as the kingdom in formation taking hold of the earth, molding it, transfiguring it and bringing it to its fulfillment within itself. The church is not an escape from the earth but is the means of becoming more firmly rooted in it.

If the visual language of the church articulates the world as some thing that is merely the background to the work of salvation, then Christian faith will be marginalized as irrelevant. The languages we use, both spoken and visual, are of enormous consequence and if we ignore them we risk distorting the perception of faith.

An important iconographic element that is often overlooked is the symbolism of the garden. From Persian carpets to the monastic cloister garth, an earthly garden symbolizes the Garden of Paradise by fusing the imagery of Eden with that of the new and heavenly Jerusalem. A well-designed garden leading to and surrounding the church remains a constant symbol, both of the



Portable iconography can take the form of panel paintings on stands. Here, an icon of St. George (artist unknown) sits on an oak stand designed by David Camele.

Courtesy of Meyer-Vogelpohl Company.

place of creation in the fullness of the kingdom and of the mission of the Christian community to transform the world into the Garden of God. Such a garden creates the necessary space to enable people to move from the outer world into the inner world of the divine, as symbolized by the church building.

Perhaps, following the example of the great architect of churches Pietro Belluschi, we could take a lead from the temples and shrines of Japan and create gardens that are places for meditation and prayer. This is not merely an exercise in good landscaping—it is an attempt to give a unified vision of all things in Christ.

SEASONAL ICONOGRAPHY

This wide-ranging discussion of the necessity, role and sources of visual imagery for the liturgy is not suggesting that we fill the church with imagery of every conceivable form. Rather, building up a treasury of portable iconography that would be used seasonally or on feasts is an obvious way of ensuring that the church does not become cluttered with imagery that does not have immediate relevance. (In the age of video and interactive television, immediate relevance is a cultural “sign of the times.”) For example, an image depicting Christ’s agony in the garden or his arrest and trial might be placed near the altar of repose on Holy Thursday. Such an image would help focus prayer during the night watch and tie devotion to the liturgy.

Portable iconography could take the form of panel paintings—such as icons, whether traditional or contemporary—scroll paintings, textile banners or other hangings. That such iconography be portable and seasonal makes sense for several reasons. For one, contemporary congregations tend to enjoy simplicity in their public buildings. This may be so because our lives have become so inundated with imagery of one sort or another that people have become weary to the point of saturation. Therefore, the display of essential imagery that is immediately relevant to what is happening would enhance the situation instead of compound weariness.

A panel painting of the season, the feast, the day’s gospel reading or the rite to be celebrated could be carried in the entrance procession, installed on a prominent stand and incensed at appropriate times. Sets of portable imagery depicting the seasons and major feasts, the various liturgies from the rites of initiation to funerals, and the main gospel events as read at the Sunday liturgy would give celebration in visual form. This would echo the rhythms and patterns of the church’s annual cycle without inundating people with a mass of permanent imagery. There is, however, one considerable advantage that permanently-in-place images, such as frescoes, have over portable imagery: It is difficult to steal them!

THE VOCATION OF THE ARTIST

From the foregoing discussion it should be apparent that the Christian artist has a divine vocation; and working in the arts in the service of the liturgy is indeed a ministry. The Christian artist should not avoid the divine vocation of being an iconographer any more than a priest should avoid preaching about the scriptures because he has a preference for other favorite subjects.

The Christian artist's vocation, or charism, is to articulate the imagery of divine revelation—revelation as explored and teased out in the great documents of the church, particularly on matters of justice and peace. The theologian articulates revelation in words. The artist articulates revelation in visual images.

This does not mean that the liturgical artist should be restricted solely to biblical imagery. Certainly the imagery of the scriptures is the fundamental vehicle by which God communicates knowledge of and communion with the divine realities; but we are nevertheless engaged by God to use our minds and imaginations to find ever new images, metaphors, signs and symbols that enable us to come to an ever deeper grasp of that divine fullness that we have come to share by divine grace.

The artist engaged in this work therefore needs to be a person of prayer. Through prayer and contemplation comes communion with the divine mysteries that the artist is shaping in his or her work. It is from this spiritual communion, nurtured by the liturgy, that the creative energies for this work well up. Too often, religious art stems more from an intellectual exercise than from a life of prayer; it gives rise to orthodox but cold, soulless works, works that might be excellent as "pieces of art" but are distressingly lacking as vehicles of any spiritual journey, let alone a Christian journey of faith and prayer.

Ultimately, any artwork will inevitably reflect the inner depth of the artist—who he or she is. If the artist has no depth, no spirituality, no life of prayer, then this will be evident in the work. An artist needs to experience personally the spiritual journey if he or she is to artistically embody this with any authenticity and is to communicate it to those who will be contemplating the work. It is important for the artist to explore, to step out, and to reflect on and pray through the various rites of the church that are likely to be celebrated during the spiral of seasons and feasts that comprise the year. The artist must explore the space that is involved and how the various images will need to be placed within that liturgical space.

This might appear to be a heavy burden on the artist. But the artist is a liturgical minister in his or her own right. The artist can only exercise that ministry if he or she has full knowledge of the role that art fulfills in the liturgy. In its highest form, the vocation of the Christian artist is to be a guide to the spiritual life through created imagery; it is a vocation that follows the road of Andrei Rubliev and Fra Angelico. The artist is not merely an executor of other people's ideas; he or she is the image-maker of the church's cosmic vision.



It is time for comprehensive programs to help nations of God re-establish their vision. Panel angels in the Testament by Mveng form a mosaic in Holy Church, Chicago. Photo: Regina

Perhaps monasteries and cathedrals could revive the practice of sponsoring studios where artists can find training in liturgy. Also, dioceses could sponsor guilds to create works on a regular basis (like the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King in Liverpool, England, which maintains a textile studio that supplies the cathedral).

A CONTEMPORARY, COMPREHENSIVE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM

It is time for contemporary, comprehensive programs of sacred art to be put into place so that they feed the imaginations of the people of God and re-establish their vision of the world of the spirit. The vision of the new creation into which our physical world can be transformed is otherwise banished from our consciousness by a totally secularized culture.

Such a comprehensive iconographic program is an act of prophecy crying out in protest against the prevailing view of the universe—of man and woman—that would leave them prey to the arts of the advertising agencies. God and any transcendental points of reference are being eradicated from the minds and imaginations of contemporary men and women, leaving them to their fears, their wounds, their despairs and their anxieties with nothing to resort to but mindless consumerism, the psychiatrist, alcohol or other addictions. People need to be given hope and a vision of the possible, an alternative to the destroying, crushing vacuum propounded by popular philosophers of consumerism and the lyrics of Muzak.

Minds and imaginations need to be nourished. The advertising industry has us devoting our lives to the pursuit of a materialistic heaven that does not exist but which nevertheless floods our screens and weekend supplements. Even Christians lead double lives, subscribing to the gospel of Christ yet living out their lives in constant acquisition of goods—false sacraments of the illusory paradise of the religion of consumerism. Christians suffer from a despiritualized world as much as anyone else. A genuine Christian *vision*—in the literal sense—needs to be restored.

And this vision cannot be restored merely through the medium of words. Priests are only too aware of the glazed looks on faces throughout their sermons. Comparatively few people actually hear the words of the liturgy, and very few read the myriad religious books that are on the market. It is a *visual* language that is required. Because the mission of the church involves the feeding and healing of whole persons, the question as to whether the slender resources of the church could be better

spent on social projects becomes irrelevant. It is the whole person who has to be fed—mind, body, soul and imagination.

Thus the artist has an *essential* role to play within the church, not merely one of carrying out the instructions of a patron. The artist fulfills a Christian ministry, that of re-creating a truly Christian vision of our universe in which the activities and concerns of our world are integrated into one totality.

A fully balanced liturgy should enable us to transform our perception of ourselves so that we begin to understand what it means to be sons and daughters of God, images of Christ; it should mold us in the task of fulfilling the vocation entrusted to us as stewards of creation and must counter that which dehumanizes the human person. A balanced liturgy affirms the conviction that everyone has received a divinely bestowed and inalienable dignity. The function of liturgical imagery is to coalesce with the other liturgical arts so that we are transformed—transformed in the way that we perceive ourselves, interpret our lives, interpret our world and live the gospel of Christ.